

# Meymandi at Large



## Abraham's Wife, Katurah

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This column is devoted to bridging the gap between basic sciences, medicine, the arts, and humanities.

I have a friend. Her name is Catterri. I asked her if she knew what her name meant. She did not. I promised to tell her, and here we go. It is a fun story loaded with history and linguistic evolution. The etymology (genealogy of the word) Caterri is the Sanskrit word “Katira,” which refers to a shrub with the property of binding, adhering, or gluing things together. In ancient days, it was also used

like shampoo to clean hair. In the Bible, there is a modified form of the word, which is *Katurah* and she was a wife of Abraham. The Old Testament tells us that Katurah brought people together and was a good companion for Abraham. By the way, as an aside, when Abraham was married to Katurah, he was still Abram and not Abraham (Genesis 16–17). In Paleo-Hebrew, over the course of

about 500 years (from the time the Sanskrit word was coined to the time of Abraham), the meaning of the word changed to mean “incense.” As one can see, the word continued to refer to the pleasant function of cleansing and perfumery. In more modern Hebrew, this word is used to refer to adhering, sticking, and ligating (e.g., surgeons ligate wounds, and religion bring people together), as well as incense. Other Western names, such as Katherine and Catherine, have the same Sanskrit roots.

There are two recently published articles: one was published in *Science* and was written by the eminent Professor of Psycholinguistics, Quentin Atkinson, from the University of Auckland, and one was published in *Nature* and was written by Michael Dunn, a distinguished professor from Max Plank Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands. Both Atkinson and Dunn trace the origin of the roughly 7,000 languages currently spoken in the world to African origin. Both researchers propose that the 7,000 languages are part of four original “mothers”—Indo-European, Bantu, Austroasian (from South-East Asia and the Pacific), and Uto-Aztecan (the native vernaculars of the Americas)—suggesting that learning any language is possible, easy, and fun.

Both authors refer to research by Noam Chomsky, Professor of Psycholinguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), who proposed that the hominid brain comes equipped with a hard-wired circuit for universal grammar and language instinct.

Atkinson posits, “...all languages are traced to Africa. One of the

lines of evidence which shows humanity's African origins is that the farther you get from that continent, the less diverse, genetically speaking, people are. Being descendants from small groups of relatively recent migrants, they are more inbred than African forebears." Atkinson took 504 languages and, using the number of phonemes and mathematical analysis, proved that languages do indeed have a common root, while Dr. Dunn's paper examined the leading hypothesis about the nature of the language.

Atkinson, Chomsky, Dunn, and Steven Pinker (author of the book

*How the Mind Works*) argue with one another through their writings about the origins of language, and the result is delicious. I will bring you more as the intellectual pugilistic rounds progress. In the meantime, to all those with names Catteri, Katrina, Katira, Katurah, Catherine, and Katherine, have fun with such an old and distinguished etymology, one who cleanses and spreads perfumery, for this was the name once given to Abraham's wife.

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